Character

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1 Definition

Character is a text- or media-based figure in a storyworld, usually human or human-like.

2 Explication

The term "character" is used to refer to participants in storyworlds created by various media (→ narration in various media) in contrast to "persons" as individuals in the real world. The status of characters is a matter of long-standing debate: can characters be treated solely as an effect created by recurrent elements in the discourse (Weinsheimer 1979), or are they to be seen as entities created by words but distinguishable from them and calling for knowledge about human beings (cf. 3.1)? Answering the latter question involves determining what kinds of knowledge are required, but also to what extent such knowledge is employed in understanding characters. Three forms of knowledge in particular are relevant for the narratological analysis of character: (a) the basic type, which provides a very fundamental structure for those entities which are seen as sentient beings; (b) character models or types such as the *femme fatale* or the *hard-boiled detective*; (c) encyclopedic knowledge of human beings underlying inferences which contribute to the process of characterization, i.e. a store of information ranging from everyday knowledge to genre-specific competence. Most theoretical approaches to character seek to circumscribe reliance on real-world knowledge in some way and treat characters as entities in a storyworld subject to specific rules (cf. 3.2). One important line of thought in the anti-realistic treatment of character is the functional view. In this perspec-tive, first established by Aristotle, characters are subordinate to or determined by the narrative action; in the 20th century, there have been attempts to describe characters in terms of a deep structure based on their roles in the plot common to all narratives (cf. 3.3).

At the discourse level, the presentation of characters shares many features with the presentation of other kinds of fictional entities. However, because of the importance of character in telling stories, these features have been discussed mainly in terms of character presentation. Among these features are the naming of characters, studied from the perspective of the function and meaning of names, and other ways of referring to characters, which contribute to the overall structural coherence of the text (cf. 3.4). Equally if not more important, however, is the process of ascribing properties to names which results in agents having these properties in the storyworld, a process known as characterization. Characterization may be direct, as when a trait is ascribed explicitly to a character, or indirect, when it is the result of inferences drawn from the text based partly on world knowledge and especially the different forms of character knowledge mentioned above. The term "characterization" can be used to refer to the ascription of a property to a character, but also for the overall process and result of attributing traits to a given character. The process of characterization can have different forms: e.g. a character is attributed specific traits at the beginning of a narrative, but other traits are subsequently added that may not conform to the original characterization, such subverting the first conception of this character (cf. 3.5).

Viewing characters as entities of a storyworld does not imply that they are self-contained. On the contrary, the storyworld is constructed during the process of narrative communication, and characters thus form a part of the signifying structures which motivate and determine the narrative communication. Characters also play a role in thematic, symbolic or other constellations of the text and of the storyworld (cf. 3.6).

For most readers, characters are one of the most important aspects of a narrative. How readers relate to a character is a matter of empirical analysis, but it is important to bear in mind that the way the text presents a character is highly influential on the relation between character and reader. Three factors in particular are relevant in this regard: (a) the transfer of perspective; (b) the reader's affective predisposition toward the character—itself influenced by: (i) the character's emotions, whether explicitly described or implicitly conveyed; (ii) the reader's reaction to her mental simulation of the character's position; (iii) the expression of emotions in the presentation—and (c) evaluation of characters in the text (cf. 3.7).

There has always been a need to categorize characters in order to facilitate description and analysis. However, most proposals seem to be either too complex or theoretically unsatisfying, so that Forster's clas-

sification into flat vs. round characters continues to be widely used (3.8).

3 History of the Concept and its Study

Until recently, there was nothing like a coherent field of research for the concept of character, but only a loose set of notions related to it touching on such issues as the ontological status of characters, the kind of knowledge necessary to understand characters, the relation between character and action, the naming of characters, characterization as process and result, the relation of the reader to a character centering around the notions of identification and empathy, etc. The situation has changed over the past ten or fifteen years thanks to a series of monographs on character by Culpeper (2001), Eder (2008), Jannidis (2004), Koch (1992), Palmer (2004), and Schneider (2001), all of which are indebted to the ground-breaking work done by Margolin in the 1980s and 1990s. Most of these studies draw on the cognitive sciences and their models of text processing and perception of persons (→ cognitive narratology). However, even though there is now a consensus on some aspects of character in narrative, many other aspects continue to be treated disparately.

3.1 People or Words

Characters have long been regarded as fictive people. To understand characters, readers tend to resort to their knowledge about real people. In this framework, an anthropological, biological or psychological theory of persons can also be used in character analysis, as in Freud's analysis of Hamlet where he claims "I have here translated into consciousness what had to remain unconscious in the mind of the hero" (Freud [1900] 1950: 164).

Another school of thought pictured character as mere words or a paradigm of traits described by words. A well-known example of this approach is Barthes's *S/Z* (1970) in which one of the codes, "voices," substitutes for person, understood as the web of semes attached to a proper name. In this view, a character is not to be taken for anything like a person, yet on closer examination these semes correspond to traditional character traits. Although he differs from Barthes in many regards, Lotman (1970), in a similar vein, describes character as a sum of all binary oppositions to the other characters in a text which, together, constitute a paradigm. A character thus forms part of a constellation of

characters who either share a set of common traits (parallels) or represent opposing traits (contrasts).

This was not the first attack against a mimetic understanding of character during the last century, a comparable approach to character having already been advocated by the New Criticism. Wellek & Warren (1949) claimed that a character consists only of the words by which it is described or into whose mouth they are put by the author. Knights (1933) had earlier ridiculed the tendency in British criticism to treat character presentations like the representations of people with the question "How many Children had Lady Macbeth?" Despite this criticism, the reduction of characters to words was not convincing, for it posed many practical problems in literary criticism and also seemed to some critics unsatisfactory for theoretical reasons. Hochman (1985), for example, defended the idea of character as human-like against structuralist and post-structuralist conceptions with moral and aesthetic arguments.

Given this situation, the series of essays by Margolin, by combining elements of structuralism, reception theory and the theory of fictional worlds, proved to be a breakthrough. For Margolin (1993), characters are first and foremost elements of the constructed narrative world: "character," he claims, "is a general semiotic element, independent of any particular verbal expression and ontologically different from it" (7). He further points out that characters can have various modes of existence in storyworlds: they can be factual, counterfactual, hypothetical, conditional, or purely subjective (1995: 375). Also taken up are questions such as how characters come into existence and what constitutes their identity (→ identity and narration), especially in storyworlds as a transtextual concept.

Philosophers, especially those with roots in analytical philosophy, have discussed the special ontological status of character under the label of incompleteness of characters. Unlike persons who exist in the real world and are complete, we can speak meaningfully only about those aspects of characters which have been described in the text or which are implied by it. Consequently, descriptions of characters have gaps, and often the missing information cannot be inferred from the given information. In contrast to the description of real persons in which a gap may appear even though it is assumed that the person is complete, characters have gaps if the description does not supply the necessary information (Eaton 1976; Crittenden 1982; Lamarque 2003).

Even though there is currently a broad consensus that character can best be described as an entity forming part of the storyworld, the ontological status of this world and its entities remains unclear. Narrato-

logical theory presently offers three approaches to addressing this problem: (a) drawing on the theory of possible worlds, the storyworld is seen as an independent realm created by the text (Margolin 1990); (b) from the perspective of cognitive theories of the reading process, character is seen as a mental model created by an empirical reader (Schneider 2001); (c) from the perspective of the neo-hermeneutical theory of literary communication, the text is an intentional object and character is a mental model created by an hypothetical historical model reader. This approach incorporates a number of insights into text processing, but focuses on the text (Jannidis 2004). The main differences between these approaches lie in how the presentation of character is described and in the use of principles borrowed from the cognitive sciences.

3.2 Character Knowledge

Even some of those who have claimed that character is a paradigm of traits assume that there exists a cultural code making it possible to perceive these traits as a meaningful whole (Lotman 1970), or *Gestalt*. This code is also resorted to in the perception of people in everyday life such that there is an interaction between the formation of (narrative) characters and the perception of people not only because the perception of people determines how plausible a character is, but also because the way characters are presented in narratives can may change the way people are perceived. At the same time, this cultural code contains information that is not applied to people but only to characters, especially stock characters and genre-based character types. Even so, the notion of a cultural code is probably too vague, since it encompasses different aspects or levels which should be distinguished: the basis type; character models; character schemas.

The concept of basis type adopts recent insights from developmental psychology. From early on, humans distinguish between objects and sentient beings. They apply to the perception of the latter a theory of mind which ascribes to them mental states such as intentions, wishes, and beliefs. Once an entity in the storyworld is identified as a character, this framework is applied to that entity, the basis type thus providing the basic outline of a character: there is an invisible "inside" which is the source of all intentions, wishes, etc., and a visible "outside" which can be perceived. All aspects of a basis type can be negated for a specific character, but either this is done explicitly or it results from genre conventions (Jannidis 2004: 185–95; Zunshine 2006: 22–7). On another, more concrete level, knowledge about time- and culture-spe-

cific types contributes to the perception of characters. Some are "stock characters" such as the rich miser, the *femme fatale*, or the mad scientist, while others draw upon general *habitus* knowledge in a society like the formal and laborious accountant, the old-maid teacher or the 19th-century laborer (Frevert & Haupt ed. 2004). Such figures serve as character models. Character models are often associated with standardized "character constellations" such as cuckold, wife, and lover. In popular culture, characterization frequently depends on character models, and the creative variation of these models is highly appreciated, while in high culture there is a strong tendency to avoid character models (cf. 3.8; Lotman [1970] 1977: 239–60).

It is important to note that basis type and character models do not exhaust the relevant knowledge forms for characters. In many instances of character description, encyclopedic knowledge—from both the real world and fictional worlds—comes into play, combining two or more items of character- (or person-)related information (e.g. "too much alcohol makes people drunk" or "vampires can be killed by a wooden stake driven into their heart"). In many cases, texts offer the reader only a fragment of information, prompting the reader to fill in the missing parts based on the appropriate knowledge. In text analysis, this kind of character encyclopedia is relevant more often than the other two, and differences in the interpretation of characters are frequently based on the fact that different entries from the character encyclopedia are resorted to.

3.3 Character and Action

One of the oldest theoretical statements on character reflects on the relation of character and action: "for tragedy is not a representation of men but of a piece of action […]. Moreover, you could not have a tragedy without action, but you can have one without character-study" (Aristotle [1927] 1932: 1450a). What Aristotle said in relation to tragedy became the origin of a school of thought which claims that in order to understand a character in a fictional text, one need only to analyze its role in the action. This approach was put on a new foundation by Propp (1928) in a ground-breaking corpus study of the Russian folktale. In analyzing a hundred Russian fairy tales, he constructed a sequence of 31 functions which he attributed to seven areas of action or types of character: opponent; donor; helper; princess and her father; dispatcher; hero; false hero. Greimas (1966) generalized this approach with his actant model in which all narrative characters are regarded as expressions of an underlying narrative grammar composed of six act-

ants ordered into pairs: the hero (also *sujet*) and his search for an object; the sender and the receiver; the hero's helper and the opponent. Each actant is not necessarily realized in one single character, since one character may perform more than one role, and one role may be distributed among several characters. Schank's concept of story skeletons also starts from the idea that stories have an underlying structure, but in his model there are many such structures and therefore many different roles for actors, e.g. the story of a divorce using the story skeleton "betrayal" with the two actors: the betrayer and the betrayed (Schank 1995: chap. 6).

Campbell (1949) described in an influential work what he called, using a term coined by James Joyce, the "monomyth," which is an abstraction of numerous mythological and religious stories marking the stages of the hero's way: separation/departure; the trials and victories of initiation; return and reintegration into society (Campbell [1949] 1990: 36). According to Campbell, who bases his argument on Freud's and especially on Jung's form of psychoanalysis, the monomyth is universal and can be found in stories, myths, and legends all over the world. In contrast to these generalized model-oriented approaches, traditional approaches tend to employ a genre- and period-specific vocabulary for action roles such as *confidant* and *intriguer* in traditional drama, or villain, sidekick, and henchman in the popular media of the 20th century.

Most of the common labels for character in use refer to the role a character has in action. "Protagonist," in use since Greek antiquity, refers to the main character of a narrative or a play, and "antagonist" to its main opponent. In contrast to these neutral labels, the term "hero" refers to a positive figure, usually in some kind of representative story. In modern high-culture narratives, there is more often an anti-hero or no single protagonist at all, but a constellation of characters (Tröhler 2007).

3.4 Referring to Characters

Referring to characters in texts occurs with the use of proper names, definite descriptions and personal pronouns (Margolin 1995: 374). In addition to these direct references, indirect evocations can be found: the untagged rendering of direct speech, the description of actions (e.g. "a hand grabbed") or use of the passive voice ("the window was opened"). The role of names in interpreting characters has been treated repeatedly, resulting in different ways of classifying name usage (e.g. Lamping 1983; Birus 1987).

Narratives can be viewed as a succession of scenes or situative frames, only one of which is active at any given moment. An active situative frame may contain numerous characters, but only some of them will be focused on by being explicitly referred to in the corresponding stretch of text. The first active frame in which a character occurs and is explicitly referred to constitutes its "introduction." After being introduced, a character may drop out of sight, not be referred to for several succeeding active frames, and then reappear. In general, whenever a character is encountered in an active frame, it is to be determined whether this is its first occurrence or whether it has already been introduced in an earlier active frame and is reappearing at a particular point. Determining that a character in the current active scene has already appeared in an earlier one is termed "identification." A distinction is to be made between normal, false, impeded, and deferred identifications. A "false identification" occurs when a previously mentioned character is identified but it then becomes clear later that some other character was in fact being referred to. An "impeded identification" does not refer unequivocally to any specific character, and a clear reference to the character or characters is never given in the text, while in the case of "deferred identification" the reader is ultimately able to establish the identity of an equivocally presented character. Deferred identification can further be broken down into an overt form in which the reader knows that he is kept in the dark and a covert form (Jannidis 2004: chap. 4 & 6, based on Emmott 1997).

3.5 Characterization

Characterization can be described as ascribing information to an agent in the text so as to provide a character in the storyworld with a certain property or properties, a process often referred to as ascribing a property to a character. In the 19th century, critics spoke of the difference between direct and indirect characterization and of the preference of contemporary writers and readers for the latter (Scherer [1888] 1977: 156–57). Until recently, characterization was understood as the text ascribing psychological or social traits to a character (e.g. Chatman 1978), but in fact texts ascribe all manner of properties to characters, including physiological and locative (space-time location) properties. Yet some textually explicit ascriptions of properties to a character may turn out to be invalid, as when this information is attributable to an unreliable → narrator or to a fellow-character. Moreover, a textual ascription may turn out to be hypothetical or purely subjective. There are also texts and styles of writing (e.g. the psychological novel) which

tend to avoid any explicit statements of characterization. The crucial issue in the process of characterization is thus what information, especially of a psychological nature, a reader is able to associate with any character as a member of the storyworld and where this information comes from. There are at least three sources of such information: (a) textually explicit ascription of properties to a character; (b) inferences that can be drawn from textual cues (e.g. "she smiled nervously"); (c) inferences based on information which is not associated with the character by the text itself but through reference to historically and culturally variable real-world conventions (e.g. the appearance of a room reveals something about the person living there or the weather expresses the feelings of the protagonist). A systematic description of such inferences employed in characterization is given by Margolin (1983). Inferences can be understood in terms of abductions (Keller 1998: chap. 9, based on Peirce), so that the fundamental role of character models and of the character encyclopedia becomes obvious: the information derived from them is not included in the text, but is presupposed to a greater or lesser degree by it.

Another key problem concerns the limits and underlying rules of such inferences when they are applied to fictional beings. Ryan (1980), noting that readers tend to assume that a storyworld resembles the real world unless explicitly stated otherwise, adopts the philosopher David Lewis's "principle of minimal departure." In a thorough criticism of this and similar hypotheses, Walton points out that this would make an infinite number of inferences possible, and he comes to the conclusion: "There is no particular reason why anyone's beliefs about the real world should come into play. As far as implications are concerned, simple conventions to the effect that whenever such and such is fictional, so and so is as well, serve nicely […]" (Walton 1990: 166). This approach, in turn, increases the number of conventions without necessity and without providing any convincing argument as to how readers go about accessing these conventions, aside from drawing on their real-world knowledge, despite the fact that many conventions apply only to fictional worlds. Even so, this does not invalidate Walton's criticism, which can probably be refuted only by including another element: the fact that characters are part of storyworlds which are not self-contained, but communicated. Readers' assumptions about what is relevant in the process of communication determine the scope and validity of inferences (Sperber & Wilson 1986).

The presentation of characters is a dynamic process, just as is the construction of characters in the reader's mind. A powerful model for describing the psychological or cognitive dynamics coming into play

here, based on the "top-down" and "bottom-up" processes observed during empirical studies on reading comprehension, has been proposed by Schneider (2001) building on concepts developed by Gerrig & Allbritton (1990). A top-down process occurs in the application of a category to a character, integrating the information given by the text into this category, while a bottom-up process results from the text information integrating a character into a type or building up an individualized representation. At the beginning of a character presentation, textual cues may trigger various types of categorization: social types ("the teacher," "the widow"); literary types (the hero in a *Bildungsroman*); text-specific types (characters that do not change throughout the story). In contrast to the top-down processing that takes place in these forms of categorization is bottom-up processing. This occurs when the → reader is unable to integrate the given information into an existing category, resulting in personalization of the character. Personalized characters can also be members of a category, but this is not the focus of their description. Reading a text involves building up either categorized or personalized characters, but information subsequently encountered in the text may change their status and possibly decategorize or depersonalize those characters.

3.6 Character and Meaning

Characters can be seen as entities in a storyworld. However, this should not be understood to mean that characters are self-contained. On the contrary: they are at the same time devices in the communication of meaning and serve purposes other than the communication of the facts of the storyworld as well. This matter was discussed above in the relation between character and action. In many forms of narrative, however, action is not the organizing principle, but a theme or an idea, and the characters in these texts are determined by that theme or idea. An extreme example is personification, i.e. the representation of an abstract principle such as freedom or justice as a character, as found in allegorical literature. Another example is certain dialogue novels, where the characters' role is to propound philosophical ideas. On the other hand, even the most life-like characters in a realistic novel can often also be described in light of their place in a thematic progression. Thus, Phelan (1987) has proposed to describe character as participation in a mimetic sphere (due to the character's traits), a thematic sphere (as a representative of an idea or of a class of people), and a synthetic sphere (the material out of which the character is made). In his heuristic of film characters, Eder (2008) adopts a similar breakdown, but adds a

fourth dimension relating to communication between the film and the audience: (a) the character as an artifact (how is it made?); (b) the character as a fictional being (what features describe the character?); (c) the character as a symbol (what meaning is communicated through the character?); and (d) the character as a symptom (why is the character as it is and what is the effect?). The difference between characters as part of storyworlds and the meaning of character cannot be aligned with the difference between (narratological) description and interpretation because elements of a character or the description of a character are often motivated by their role in thematic, symbolic, aesthetic and other networks.

3.7 Relation of the Reader to the Character

Characters may induce strong feelings in readers, a fact often discussed under the label "identification." Identification is a psychological process and as such lies outside of the scope of narrative analysis. On the other hand, it is widely recognized that to some extent identification results from and is controlled by various textual cues and devices. A first problem is the concept of identification itself, since it involves a variety of aspects: sympathy with a character who is similar to the reader; empathy for a character who is in a particular situation; attraction to a character who is a role model for the reader. To date, there is no means of integrating all of these factors into a satisfactory theory of identification. There are older, mostly outdated models of identification, based on Freud or Lacan, and newer models, some of which are based on empirical studies (e.g. Oatley & Gholamain 1997), while others seek to integrate empirical findings and media analysis (e.g. Eder 2008, part VII). Another problem is historical variation: much literature before 1800 aims more at creating an attitude of admiration for the protagonist than it does at immersing the reader in the situation of the character (Jauss 1974; Schön 1999).

Provisionally, the problem of identification with the character in narrative can be broken down into the following three aspects: (a) "transfer of perspective" works on different levels: perception (the reader "experiences" the sensory input of a character); intention (the reader is made aware of a character's goals); beliefs (the reader is introduced into the character's worldview). In narrative texts, such transfer occurs in part through the devices of → focalization and → speech representation; (b) the "affective relation" to the character is a complex phenomenon resulting from various factors. First is the information gleaned from the text bearing on the character's emotions projected

against the backdrop of general, historical, and cultural schemas applicable to particular situations and the emotions "appropriate" for these situations. Second is mental simulation of the depicted events, which creates an empathetic reaction involving the reader's disposition to respond to the emotion experienced by the character (a display of sadness creates pity), but may also activate similar emotions (a display of sadness generates a similar feeling in the reader). To what extent such simulations actually occur has been discussed extensively: proponents see support for their position in the discovery of mirror neurons (Lauer 2007), while opponents point out that this aspect plays a limited role if any at all (e.g. Mellmann [2006], who models the reader's response on the basis of evolutionary psychology). Such responsive dispositions may be socially induced, but they may also exist in other forms, such as sadistic or voyeuristic arousal. In any case, reaction to simulated events is not constrained to characters, but includes events of all types. These reactions to events not directly related to characters can be used to "externalize" the character's affects (e.g. a description of a storm which reflects the agitated state of mind of the protagonist watching the storm). The third factor in the affective relation is the expressive use of language or the presentation of emotions in texts using phonetic, rhythmic, metrical, syntactical, lexical, figurative, rhetorical, and narrative devices including free indirect discourse and similar strategies (Winko 2003); (c) "evaluation of characters" is based on historically and culturally variable measures of value. Evaluation can be explicit thanks to the use of evaluative vocabulary, or implicit due to behavior that implies evaluation according common social standards. This includes implicit comparison between the reader or spectator and the protagonist, already described by Aristotle. An evaluative stance toward a character creates such emotional responses as admiration, sympathy or repulsion, at the same time coloring the reader's affective relation to the character.

3.8 Categories of Character

The most widely known proposal on how to categorize character is still Forster's opposition between flat and round characters: "Flat characters [...] are constructed round a single idea or quality" ([1927] 1985: 67) while round characters are "more highly organized" (75) and "are capable of surprising in a convincing way" (78). Critics have long accepted this categorization as plausible, relating it to the way real people are perceived. However, the criteria Forster based it on are vague, especially the notion of development to explain the impression of a round

character (e.g. Scholes et al. [1966] 2006: chap. 5). A significant problem in this discussion results from the fact that all we know about a specific character is based on what can be learned from a text or another medium. Therefore, it is often not easy to distinguish between the character and the way it is presented, as can be seen, for example, with Rimmon-Kenan, who proposes three dimensions to categorize characters: "complexity, development, penetration into the 'inner life'" ([1983] 2002: 41), thus mixing aspects of the character as an entity of the storyworld with those of its presentation. Similarly, Hochman (1985) proposes eight dimensions as a basis of categorization without distinguishing between these two aspects. To name but three of them: stylization—naturalism; complexity—simplicity; dynamism—staticism. One of the earliest attempts to distinguish clearly between these aspects in categorizing characters comes from Fishelov (1990), who combines the opposition between presentation and storyworld with the distinction between flat and round characters. Another problematic aspect of this approach is the fact that it is almost always combined with an evaluative stance valorizing the complex and devaluating the simple regardless of the requirements of different genres (as Forster already deplored), or deprecating those genres.

Stereotypes are often regarded as the prototypical flat character. With Dyer (1993), however, a distinction can be drawn between the social type and the stereotype. Social types are known because they belong to a society with which the reader is familiar, while stereotypes are ready-made images of the unknown. In fiction they differ, according to Dyer, to the extent that social types can appear in almost any kind of plot, while stereotypes carry with them an implicit narrative.

4 Topics for Further Investigation

All of the aspects outlined above deserve further investigation, but three problems are of particular interest in the current state of research. (a) Recent decades have seen a growing interest in the social construction of identities—national identities, gender identities, etc. Analysis of character presentation and formation plays an important part in any interpretation interested in identity construction in literature, but up to now those engaged in identity analysis have neglected narratological research on character; at the same time, narrative analysis has mostly ignored the historical case studies carried out on identity construction by specialists of cultural studies. (b) Evaluation in literary texts has been and is still a neglected field of research. There are many ways a text can influence or predetermine the evaluative stance of the reader,

and much systematic and historical work in this area remains to be done. (c) The question of how a reader relates to a character can only be answered by an interdisciplinary research bringing together textual analysis and the cognitive sciences.

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